The Catacombs of Rome (Italian: Catacombe di Roma) are ancient catacombs, underground burial places under Rome, Italy, of which there are at least forty, some discovered only in recent decades. Though most famous for Christian burials, either in separate catacombs or mixed together, people of all the Roman religions are buried in them, beginning in the 2nd century AD, mainly as a response to overcrowding and shortage of land. The Etruscans, like many other European peoples, used to bury their dead in underground chambers. The original Roman custom was cremation, after which the burnt remains were kept in a pot, ash-chest or urn, often in a columbarium. From about the 2nd century AD, inhumation (burial of unburnt remains) became more fashionable, in graves or sarcophagi, often elaborately carved, for those who could afford them. Christians also preferred burial to cremation because of their belief in bodily resurrection at the Second Coming. The Park of the Caffarella and Colli Albani (Rome Metro) are nearby.

The Christian catacombs are extremely important for the art history of Early Christian art, as they contain the great majority of examples from before about 400 AD, in fresco and sculpture, as well as gold glass medallions (these, like most bodies, have been removed). The Jewish catacombs are similarly important for the study of Jewish culture at this period. A number of dubious relics of catacomb saints were promoted after the rediscovery of the catacombs.

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The word *catacombs* comes from the Latin root word *catatumbas* meaning either “among the tombs” or, according to other translations from the original Late Latin, “next to the quarry”. The later translation stems from the first excavations done to create the catacombs system, which was conducted outside of Rome near the quarry.[2]

**Precursors**

The Etruscans, who at the time occupied what is now Rome, had placed their dead in early dug-outs, such as the Tomb of the Capitals, and less complex tumuli. The early Roman custom had been cremation, in which burnt remains are placed in a pot, urn, or ash-chest, and then often kept in a columbarium. Around the 2nd century in Rome (during the reign of Hadrian), inhumation had begun to grow in popularity, and for those who could afford it, fashionable graves and sarcophagi were made and used for burial. By the 4th century, burial had surpassed cremation, and the construction of tombs had grown greater and spread throughout the empire. Christians and Jews preferred burial due to the idea of preserving the dead body for resurrection.

**Discoveries**

Through research, it has been found that the population’s diet consisted of freshwater fish. Sample D9-W-XVI-8, considered to be a two-year-old child, shows that children in Ancient Rome were breastfed and this child, in particular, had not yet been weaned off of their mother. It can be determined that the child had not begun to wean due to the fact that the $\delta^{15}N$ values had not begun to decline.[3]

Fish in the early Christian diet was not only for symbolic and religious reasons, but was also used as a meal to commemorate the dead. Fish also represented that the religious and the secular were intertwined in Roman society as fish was a concrete staple of the daily diet.[4][3]

**Christian catacombs**
The first large-scale catacombs in the vicinity of Rome were excavated from the 2nd century onwards. They were carved through *tufo*, a soft volcanic rock, outside the walls of the city, because Roman law forbade burial places within city limits. The pagan custom was to incinerate corpses, while early Christians and Jews buried the dead. Since most Christians and Jews at that time belonged to the lower classes or were slaves, they usually lacked the resources to buy land for burial purposes. Instead, networks of tunnels were dug in the deep layers of tufo which occurred naturally on the outskirts of Rome. At first, these tunnels were probably not used for regular worship, but simply for burial and, extending pre-existing Roman customs, for memorial services and celebrations of the anniversaries of Christian martyrs. There are sixty known subterranean burial chambers in Rome. They were built outside the walls along main Roman roads, like the Via Appia, the Via Ostiense, the Via Labicana, the Via Tiburtina, and the Via Nomentana. Names of the catacombs – like St Calixtus and St Sebastian, which is alongside Via Appia – refer to martyrs that may have been buried there. About 80% of the excavations used for Christian burials date to after the time of the persecutions.

The roots of Christianity can be traced back to Ancient Rome, with the discovery of catacombs. Christian catacombs exist as a burial ground for early Christians accompanied by inscriptions and early wall art. Although catacombs were of Jewish origin in the first century, by the end of the sixth century there were over 60 Christian catacombs. These catacombs served as a connector for various Christian communities through the underlying concepts of socio-economic status shown within the art. Additionally, the art showed a story of how Christians in the first couple of centuries viewed the world and their idealistic view of how it should be.

Christian art in the catacombs is split into three categories: iconographic, stylistic, and technical. From the first to the sixth century, the art in Roman Christian catacombs progressively went into phases as well: an early phase, an Old Testament phase, and a New Testament phase.

Excavators (fossors), no doubt slaves, built vast systems of galleries and passages on top of each other. They lie 7–19 metres (23–62 ft) below the surface in an area of more than 2.4 square kilometres (590 acres). Narrow steps that descend as many as four stories join the levels. Passages are about 2.5 by 1 metre (8.2 ft × 3.3 ft). Burial niches (loculi) were carved into walls. They are 40–60 centimetres (16–24 in) high and 120–150 centimetres (47–59 in) long. Bodies were placed in chambers in stone sarcophagi in their clothes and bound in linen. Then the chamber was sealed with a slab bearing the name, age and the day of death. The fresco decorations provide the main surviving evidence for Early Christian art, and initially show typically Roman styles used for decorating homes - with secular iconography adapted to a religious function. The catacomb of Saint Agnes is a small church. Some families were able to construct *cubicula* which would house various loculi and the architectural elements of the space would offer a support for decoration. Another excellent place for artistic programs were the arcosolia.

**History of Excavation**

The complex system of tunnels that would later be known as the catacombs were first excavated by the Etruscan people that lived in the region predating the Romans. These tunnels were first excavated in the process of mining for various rock resources such as limestone and sandstone. These quarries became the basis for later excavation, first by the Romans for rock resources and then by the Christians and Jews for burial sites and mass graves.

**Decline and rediscovery**
In 380, Christianity became a state religion. At first, many still desired to be buried in chambers alongside the martyrs. However, the practice of catacomb burial declined slowly, and the dead were increasingly buried in church cemeteries. In the 6th century catacombs were used only for martyrs’ memorial services, though some paintings were added as late as the 7th century, for example a Saint Stephen in the Catacomb of Commodilla. Apparently Ostrogoths, Vandals and Lombards that sacked Rome also violated the catacombs, presumably looking for valuables. By the 10th century catacombs were practically abandoned, and holy relics were transferred to above-ground basilicas.

In the intervening centuries they remained forgotten until they were accidentally rediscovered in 1578, after which Antonio Bosio spent decades exploring and researching them for his Roma Sotterranea (1632). Archeologist Giovanni Battista de Rossi (1822–1894) published the first extensive professional studies about catacombs. In 1956 and 1959 Italian authorities found more catacombs near Rome. The catacombs have become an important monument of the early Christian church.

Due to high levels of humidity and temperature, bone preservation has been negatively affected. Scientists are unable to identify the sex of the dead due to the lack of preservation in the bones.[8]

**Today**

Currently, maintenance of the catacombs is in the hands of the papacy, which has invested in the Salesians of Don Bosco the supervision of the Catacombs of St. Callixtus on the outskirts of Rome.

Responsibility for the Christian catacombs lies with the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology (Pontificia Commissione di Archeologia Sacra), which directs excavations and restorations. Study of the catacombs is directed by the Pontifical Academy of Archaeology.

**Typology**

Roman catacombs are made up of underground passages (*ambulacra*), out of whose walls graves (*loculi*) were dug. These *loculi*, generally laid out vertically (*pilae*), could contain one or more bodies. A *loculus* large enough to contain two bodies was referred to as a *bisomus*. Another type of burial, typical of Roman catacombs, was the *arcosolium*, consisting of a curved niche, enclosed under a carved horizontal marble slab. *Cubicula* (burial rooms containing *loculi* all for one family) and *cryptae* (chapels decorated with frescoes) are also commonly found in catacomb passages. When space began to run out, other graves were also dug in the floor of the corridors - these graves are called *formae*.

**List of catacombs in Rome**

The Roman catacombs, of which there are forty in the suburbs, were built along the consular roads out of Rome, such as the Appian way, the via Ostiense, the via Labicana, the via Tiburtina, and the via Nomentana.

**Catacombs of Marcellinus and Peter**

These catacombs are situated on the ancient Via Labicana, today Via Casilina in Rome, Italy, near the church of Santi Marcellino e Pietro ad Duas Lauros. Their name refers to the Christian martyrs Marcellinus and Peter who, according to tradition, were buried here, near the body of St. Tiburtius.
Catacombs of Domitilla

Close to the Catacombs of San Callisto are the large and impressive Catacombs of Domitilla (named after Saint Domitilla), spread over 17 kilometres (11 miles) of caves.

In the beginning of 2009, at the request of the Vatican, the Divine Word Missionaries, a Roman Catholic Society of priests and Brothers, assumed responsibility as administrator of St. Domitilla Catacombs.

Catacombs of Commodilla

These catacombs, on the Via Ostiensis, contain one of the earliest images of a bearded Christ. They originally held the relics of Saints Felix and Adauctus.

Catacombs of Generosa

Located on the Campana Road, these catacombs are said to have been the resting place, perhaps temporarily, of Simplicius, Faustinus and Beatrix, Christian Martyrs who died in Rome during the Diocletian persecution (302 or 303).

Catacombs of Praetextatus

These are found along the via Appia, and were built at the end of 2nd century. They consist of a vast underground burial area, at first in pagan then in Christian use, housing various tombs of Christian martyrs. In the oldest parts of the complex may be found the "cubiculum of the coronation", with a rare depiction for that period of Christ being crowned with thorns, and a 4th-century painting of Susanna and the old men in the allegorical guise of a lamb and wolves.

Catacombs of Priscilla

The Catacomb of Priscilla, situated at the Via Salaria across from the Villa Ada, probably derives its name from the name of the landowner on whose land they were built. They are looked after by the Benedictine nuns of Priscilla.

Catacombs of San Callisto

Sited along the Appian way, these catacombs were built after AD 150, with some private Christian hypogea and a funeral area directly dependent on the Catholic Church. It takes its name from the deacon Saint Callixtus, proposed by Pope Zephyrinus in the administration of the same cemetery - on his accession as pope, he enlarged the complex, that quite soon became the official one for the Roman Church. The arcades, where more than fifty martyrs and sixteen pontiffs were buried, form part of a complex graveyard that occupies fifteen hectares and is almost 20 km (12 mi) long.
Built into the hill beside San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, these catacombs are said to have been the final resting place of St. Lawrence. The church was built by Pope Sixtus III and later remodeled into the present nave. Sixtus also redecorated the shrine in the catacomb and was buried there.[13]

**Catacombs of San Pancrazi**

Established underneath the San Pancrazi basilica which was built by Pope Symmachus on the place where the body of the young martyr Saint Pancras, or Pancratius, had been buried. In the 17th century, it was given to the Discalced Carmelites, who completely remodeled it. The catacombs house fragments of sculpture and pagan and early Christian inscriptions.

**Catacombs of San Sebastiano**

One of the smallest Christian cemeteries, this has always been one of the most accessible catacombs and is thus one of the least preserved (of the four original floors, the first is almost completely gone). On the left hand end of the right hand wall of the nave of the primitive basilica, rebuilt in 1933 on ancient remains, arches to end the middle of the nave of the actual church, built in the 13th century, are visible, along with the outside of the apse of the Chapel of the Relics; whole and fragmentary collected sarcophagi (mostly of 4th century date) were found in excavations.

Via a staircase down, one finds the arcades where varied cubicula (including the cubiculum of Giona's fine four stage cycle of paintings, dating to the end of the 4th century). One then arrives at the restored crypt of S. Sebastiano, with a table altar on the site of the ancient one (some remains of the original's base still survive) and a bust of Saint Sebastian attributed to Bernini. From here one reaches a platform, under which is a sandstone cavity ad catacumbas which once may have been named "ad catacumbas", thus giving this and all other tombs of this type their name. 3 mausolea of the second half of the 2nd century (but also in later use) open off the platform. The first one on the right, decorated on the inside with paintings of funereal banquets and the miracle of the calling out of Cerasa's demons, on the inside contains paintings (including a ceiling painting of a Gorgon's head) and inhumation burials and has a surviving inscription reading "Marcus Clodius Hermes", the name of its owner. The second, called by some "tomb of the Innocentiores" (a burial club which owned it), has a refined stucco ceiling, Latin inscriptions in Greek characters, and a graffito with the initials of the Greek words for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour". On the left is the mausoleum of Ascia, with an exterior wall painting of vine shoots rising from kantharoi up trompe-l’œil pillars.

A room called the "Triglia" rises from the platform, roughly in the middle of the basilica and cut into from above by the present basilica. This covered room was used for funereal banquets; the plastered walls have hundreds of graffiti by the devotees at these banquets, carved in the second half of the 3rd to the beginnings of the 4th century, with appeals to the apostles Peter and Paul. From the "Triglia" one passed into an ancient ambulatory, which turns around into an apse: here is a collection of epitaphs and a model of all the mausolei, of the "Triglia" and of the Constantinian.
basilica. From here one descends into the "Platonica", a construction at the rear of the basilica that was long believed to have been the temporary resting place for Peter and Paul, but was in fact (as proved by excavation) a tomb for the martyr Quirinus, bishop of Sescia in Pannonia, whose remains were brought here in the 5th century. To the right of the "Platonica" is the chapel of Honorius III, adapted as the vestibule of the mausoleum, with interesting 13th-century paintings of Peter and Paul, the Crucifixion, saints, the Massacre of the Innocents, Madonna and Child, and other subjects. On the left is an apsidal mausoleum with an altar built against the apse: on the left wall a surviving graffito reading "domus Petri" either hints at Peter having been buried here or testifies to the belief at the time the graffito was written that Peter was buried here.

Catacombs of San Valentino
These catacombs were dedicated to Saint Valentine. In the 13th century, the martyr's relics were transferred to Basilica of Saint Praxedes.

Catacombs of Sant'Agnese
Built for the conservation and veneration of the remains of Saint Agnes of Rome. Agnes' bones are now conserved in the church of Sant'Agnese fuori le mura in Rome, built over the catacomb. Her skull is preserved in a side chapel in the church of Sant'Agnese in Agone in Rome's Piazza Navona.

Catacombs of via Anapo
On the via Salaria, the Catacombs of via Anapo are datable to the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century, and contain diverse frescoes of biblical subjects.

Jewish catacombs
There are six known Jewish catacombs in Rome, two of which are open to the public: Vigna Randanini and Villa Torlonia.

The Jewish catacombs were discovered in 1918, and archaeological excavations continued for twelve years. The structure has two entrances, one on via Syracuse and the other inside Villa Torlonia. The catacombs extend for more than 13,000 square metres (140,000 sq ft), and date back to the period between the 2nd and 3rd centuries, and possibly remained in use until the 5th century. There are almost a century of epitaphs, but these do not show any examples of a particular relief, beyond some rare frescoes showing the classic Jewish religious symbols. Jewish Catacombs are distinguished from their Christian counterparts by various signs as well as the fact that Jewish people did not visit the dead in the Catacombs. Parts of the Old Testament and the symbol of a candlestick with seven-branches have been spotted on the walls of Jewish Catacombs.[14]

Due to high levels of humidity and temperature, bone preservation has been negatively affected in the catacombs. Scientists are unable to identify the sex of the dead due to the lack of preservation in the bones.[15]

The other catacombs are not open to the public because of the instability of their structure and the presence of radon.

Gallery of paintings from the catacombs of Rome
In the Catacombs of Rome, there are many different pieces of artwork. Most artworks are religious in nature some depicting important Christian rights such as baptism, or religious scenes and stories such as the story of "The Three Hebrews and the Fiery Furnace" or biblical figures such as Adam and Eve.

See also

- Antonio Bosio, (c. 1575-1576–1629) was an Italian scholar, the first systematic explorer of subterranean Rome
- Catacomb saints, corpses from the Roman catacombs that were decorated and presented as relics of Christian saints
- Depictions of Jesus

Notes


6. van der Meer, F., Early Christian Art, 1967, Faber and Faber, 19


9. Catacombs of Domitilla (http://www.domitilla.info/)


11. Divine Word Missionaries (http://www.svdcuria.org/)


References

- Benjamin Scott, The Contents and Teachings of the Catacombs at Rome... a vindication of Pure and Primitive Christianity etc., Longmans, 1853
- Dean Arthur Stanley, Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church, John Murray, 1861
- Rev. William Henry Withrow, Valeria, the Martyr of the Catacombs, William Briggs, 1882

External links

- About the Saint Sebastian Catacombs (http://www.catacombe.org/)
- Catacombe Roma (http://www.showcaves.com/english/it/misc/CatacombeRoma.html)
- UrbanAdventure.org with some short videos taken in the catacombs or Rome (http://www.urbanadventure.org/members/2002trip/italy/romecatas.htm)
The Catacombs of Rome: An Overview

2. The Catacombs of St Callixtus (http://www.josemariaescriva.info/article/the-catacombs-of-st-callixtus)
6. The Vatican: spirit and art of Christian Rome (http://cdm16028.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15324coll10/id/107497), a book from The Metropolitan Museum of Art Libraries (fully available online as PDF), which contains material on the catacombs
7. Catacomb of Commodilla; Interior, View of the Cubiculum Leonis with Christ between Alpha and Omega on the Central Panel; Early Christian; Creation date: 4th century (http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/hart/x-305307/05d111027)


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